

When It Rains by Tea_For_One_Please

Series: [Smoke on the Water \[2\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: Aged-Up Character(s), Angst with a Happy Ending, Boys In Love, Boys Kissing, Domestic Fluff, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Established Relationship, Fluff, Fluff and Angst, Healthy Relationships, Hurt/Comfort, Implied/Referenced Homophobia, Injury, M/M, Season 3 Didn't Happen, Sequel, Sibling Bonding, Sibling Love

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Holly Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Ted Wheeler, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven | Jane Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Minor or Background Relationship(s), Will Byers & Eleven | Jane Hopper, Will Byers/Mike Wheeler

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2021-05-29

Updated: 2021-05-31

Packaged: 2022-03-31 20:35:28

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Chapters: 2

Words: 13,978

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

A year after calling it quits, Mike and Will reconciled and rekindled their relationship. Six months later, they're trying juggle spending their summer vacation with their families, friends and each other, while coping with domestic issues and financial independence.

Still, with the forthcoming prospect of a couple of weeks alone in Chicago, things are looking up... right?

1. The Secrets

The clock on the wall silently strikes two, unnoticed by the room's occupant, engrossed as he is in his task. He's hunched over the desk in the corner of the spare bedroom, brow furrowed in intense concentration as he makes gentle strokes over the rough paper of the little book, willing his hand not to tremble as he intricately traces an outline across the page. With the utmost care, he lifts the brush up, and the line he's drawn reaches a neat point, and he breathes a sigh of relief.

Will leans back in his chair for a moment, and wipes a few beads of sweat from his hairline. The room is stiflingly hot and humid, even with the window thrown as far open as it can be. The curtains hang still, though, and the trees stand silent, with no breeze to disturb them. It hasn't rained in several weeks, and the moisture hangs thickly in the air.

There's no way he could even think about sleeping, and frankly, he doesn't really understand how everyone else in the house is managing. Hopper's snores echo through the adjoining wall, and the creaking of the attic floorboards stopped well over two hours ago, so El's certainly asleep by now. The only person he can't account for is his mother, but he recognised her footsteps heard her walking to the bathroom an hour ago, so it seems likely that she's dropped off again since.

Even without the heat to contend with, Will likes working during the early hours of the morning. Diagnosed teenage insomnia, following the incident with the Mind Flayer, left him in a rut of bizarre sleeping habits which he's never managed to kick. Now, he's two months away from becoming a junior in college, and he's still the same fourteen-year-old trying to fritter the nights away with painting.

The only difference is that this painting is kind of a big deal, and Will grimaces at the looming deadline. The coming Tuesday marks six months since he and Mike got back together, and Will's making him something to mark the occasion. It still seems wild to him that he and Mike are together again, considering their time apart last year, and the fact that they didn't see each other at all during that time.

This time around, they've done things a little differently. Having accepted that it's difficult for Will to come and see him in Chicago, Mike pledged to come and see him in Kentucky every week. This didn't always work out, as there were times when Mike would call and say he was swamped with assignments and studying for finals; nonetheless, they saw a lot more of each other during this last semester than they did during the two before it, and for that, Will's grateful.

Now, six months on, they're back in Hawkins for a while. They came back at the start of the vacation, but they're planning to go and spend some time in Chicago together in a couple of weeks, when they've had enough of being with their families.

In other words, Will thinks with considerable satisfaction, *things are looking up*. The only problem is the six-month date is now less than four days away, and Will's nowhere near finished with his painting. At present, he's got little more than a sketched outline and a single patch of watercolour paint – on the lighthouse in the centre of the image.

It's a recreation of the picture Max took of them at Lake Michigan, over three years ago; Mike kept it and showed it to Will shortly after they got back together, and Will conveniently forgot to give it back. He feels a little guilty about it, but Mike either didn't notice or decided to let him keep it, because he's never asked for it back.

Will stifles a yawn, and groans as he remembers he has a shift in the morning; in less than seven hours, in fact. Seven hours is generally more sleep than he gets in a night, but he likes to make sure he's had enough when he's working, so as not to spend the entire morning running on caffeine and sarcasm.

He reaches for his water glass, frowning as he realises it's empty, and eases himself to his feet, shaking his leg to work out the pins and needles that are setting in. Steps six and eleven creak, so he skips carefully over them on his way to the kitchen. Another yawn slips out as he wanders in, and almost drops his glass when a voice speaks from the kitchen table.

"Couldn't sleep either, huh?"

“Jesus, Mom,” he hisses, “you almost gave me a heart attack!”

“Sorry,” she says, and he can just about make out a wry smile through the darkness.

“It’s the heat,” he grumbles, filling his glass and joining her at the table.

“Yeah, I get it. I tell you, it’s worse when you have to share a bed.” He hums vaguely, unwilling to admit that he does, in fact, know this. Of course Joyce knows about him and Mike, but he doesn’t need to confirm any suspicions that he and Mike regularly share a bed, or any other details, for that matter. Instead, he sips his water, and hopes she doesn’t ask any follow-up questions. “How are things with Mike?” she asks, and he feels inexplicably that he jinxed himself.

“Good,” he says evasively, and she raises an eyebrow. “No, like, *actually* good,” he adds, and she nods her approval. “It’s our six-month anniversary next week.”

“Again,” Joyce remarks, tongue-in-cheek.

“That’s not funny.” He scowls at her. “I expect that kind of thing from El, not you.”

“You’re right,” she says, biting her lip. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m painting something for him,” he says, “that’s why I’m still up.”

“I’m sure he’ll like it.”

“Hope so.” He yawns for a third time and stands up again. “Anyway, I’m gonna try and sleep again.”

“Night, honey,” she says.

“Night.”

When he returns to his room, he flops down on the bed and picks up his old SuperComm. The Party don’t often use them anymore, but he

and Mike still use theirs occasionally when they're both at home, especially if one of them is having a bad night. With this in mind, Will twists the dial to their personal channel and pulls out the antenna, pressing the speak button a few times, so that it'll make a noise at the other end. This way, if Mike's awake, he'll hear it, but it won't disturb him if he isn't.

He waits ten seconds or so, and then he hears Mike's voice through the speaker. "Will?"

"Hey," he says quietly, keen not to disturb anyone. "Just wondered if you were awake."

"Yeah," is the grumpy reply. "It's this damn heat."

"It's awful. And I've got to work at nine."

"Yikes." The line is quiet for a moment, then Mike speaks again. "My parents had another fight today."

"What about?"

"I don't even know," he sighs.

"I thought they didn't even talk to each other?"

"They have been lately, but only ever arguing. Even Holly's noticed."

"I'm sorry," Will says gently; he knows that this is a sensitive subject for Mike, and that it was a major insecurity in their relationship before. "Do you want to come over?"

"Not now," he says, "I don't think your parents would thank me for that." Will smiles, partly because of the understatement, and partly because it's only recently that the phrase *your parents* has started having pleasant associations. "What time do you get off work?"

"Not until five."

"You're there all day?"

"Yeah, Cathy has to go into the city for a hospital appointment or

something. Does mean she's not going to be around though," he adds slyly.

"I could come and browse," Mike says, getting the hint.

"You can stay for the day if you bring food."

"Deal." He can tell Mike's smiling. "See you tomorrow, then?"

"Think you'll find it's today," Will says with a chuckle.

"Fair point. Good night."

"I love you," Will says with a smile.

"Love you too, sleep well." The line cuts out, and Will folds down his radio's antennae, suddenly overcome with drowsiness. He tugs off his t-shirt, which is practically sticking to him, and fumbles with his alarm, to make sure he wakes up in time. This done, he slumps against the pillow and closes his eyes, without even bothering to get under the comforter.

When he opens his eyes again, sunlight is streaming through the window, and Will sighs with frustration; it feels as though he's only been asleep ten seconds, but a glance at his alarm clock tells him it's been nearly five hours.

He rolls out of bed, feeling absolutely filthy with sweat, and dips into the bathroom as he hears El's footsteps on the attic stairs. Hardly caring about the chill of the water, he dives under the shower's flow, welcoming the soothing coolness against his skin. Even after he's properly washed himself, he just stands there for a while, closing his eyes and dipping his face under the stream of cold water, deeply reluctant to get out, until El hammers on the door and shouts at him to hurry up.

Mercifully, Hopper's running late, so he offers Will a ride into town, which he readily accepts, because the prospect of cycling even a mile in this heat is headache-inducing. Equally fortunate is the fact that Hopper's not really a morning person, so there's little need to talk on

the way.

As he closes the truck door and calls goodbye, Will raises an eyebrow, spotting Mike slotting something into a mailbox on the square, before turning around and wandering over to the store.

“Morning,” Mike says; he looks tired, and Will wonders if he got up especially to come to work with him.

“Hello,” he says coyly, sliding his key into the lock and letting them in. “When you said about coming to work with me, I thought you were kidding.”

“Do you... not want me here?” Mike says, looking disheartened, but Will nods hastily.

“Of course I do! I just... didn’t expect it, that’s all.” He counts some change from the float into the register and passes Mike a packet of new paintbrushes, and Mike raises an eyebrow.

“You should be paying me.”

“How about this?” Will says with a grin, leaning over the counter and pressing a soft kiss to his boyfriend’s lips. “Every hour you work, you get one of those.”

“Every *hour*?” Mike protests, leaning forward, but Will leans back, away from him, and points to the shelves. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m serious until you put those brushes out, then we’ll see.” Mike grumbles as he steps over to the correct shelf, and Will bites back a laugh as he turns the sign on the door from *CLOSED* to *OPEN*.

Having spent last summer in Kentucky avoiding Mike, Will found upon his return to Hawkins this year that he had no regular summer job lined up, unlike most of the others. Dustin works at the Radio Shack, and Max and Lucas found jobs together as lifeguards at the community pool. Mike does odd jobs around his neighbourhood, but he’s privately admitted to Will that this is only to keep out of his parents’ way, and to avoid the appearance that he’s the only one of

them who doesn't need to earn money over the summer.

Will spent the first two weeks of the summer poring over the vacancy listings in the *Hawkins Post*, to no avail: everywhere that was hiring wanted full-time employees with several years' experience, not students at home for the summer. He was at close to despairing, and was tentatively telling Mike that he might have to cancel their summer plans and go back to Louisville to find a job, when Mike suggested asking for a job at Cathy's Crafts, the specialist art store that had opened the year before.

Cathy, the owner, knew him by sight when he arrived, as he had frequented the store several times, and told him that she had been considering opening an advertisement for a store assistant. He immediately expressed his interest, and knowing of his interest in the arts and his familiarity with the store, she practically hired him on the spot.

Now, Mike drags an extra stool out to the counter from the back room, shunting it next to Will's and hopping up to sit next to him.

"So where's the food?" Will teases, referring to their radio conversation the night before, and Mike's eyes widen.

"Shit. I forgot."

"I'm kidding," he chuckles, glancing at the door and threading their fingers together.

"God, I can't wait to be out of Hawkins," Mike sighs, looking wistfully at their entwined hands. "You know, when we can do this without looking over our shoulders every second."

"Me neither," Will says quietly.

He wouldn't admit it because he doesn't want to put Mike under any pressure, but these days, it's only for Mike's sake that he's even careful at all. He knows Mike's parents well enough to know that they absolutely wouldn't accept their son coming out to them. All the while he's still financially dependent on them, it's totally reasonable

that he wants to keep their relationship quiet.

This necessity makes it all the better that so few people brave the scorching heat to visit the store, and although a couple of people come in each hour, few buy anything, and Will suspects that they're just seizing the opportunity to step out of the heat for a few minutes. Still, it's exposure, he supposes, and they might come back, so he doesn't complain. It does mean that he and Mike have to take regular breaks from being openly affectionate and act like friends and colleagues, but this is an act that they've essentially been playing for most of their lives, so they're used to it.

Whenever the door closes on someone's way out, though, Mike's hand slides across the counter, or else he turns to Will and pecks him on the cheek, just because they can. Will realises that it's a port in a storm; an unusual day where they can live more truthfully than they normally can in Hawkins.

It comes as a shock, therefore, when Mike's mother walks through the door. "Mom," he says, his mind immediately jumping to *oh God she's found out and she's come down here to kick me out and tell me I can never see Will again*. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for something for Holly's birthday," she says, bemused. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Just keeping me company," Will says cheerfully, clearly aware of Mike's inner turmoil. "I'd have been here by myself all day otherwise. Can I help you find anything?" As his mother turns towards the shelves, Mike flashes him a grateful smile, not sure he would have been able to formulate his thoughts quickly enough to keep their cover.

"I was thinking of something like a colouring book," she replies, running her eyes along the rows and rows of books and paper.

"We don't keep a *lot* of that sort of thing in," Will admits, hopping down from the stool and joining her across the room, "but I think there's some colour-by-numbers books, if that would work?"

"That would do nicely," she says approvingly, and he crouches down

and pulls out a thin book.

“See what you think.”

She flicks through it and nods, smiling at him. “That’s perfect, Will, thank you.”

He leads her back to the counter and consults the notebook Cathy made for him. “That’ll be... seven dollars.”

She smiles again, and Mike senses what’s coming. “I suppose... there’s no chance of a friends-or-family discount?”

“I’m afraid not,” Will says apologetically. “I’m not even allowed to give my own family a discount.”

“Well, never mind,” she says, clearly a little put out, and she dips into her purse for the money.

“Thanks, Mrs Wheeler,” he says, plastering on his customer-service face until she leaves. “Honestly,” he mutters. “We barely make a profit as it is, without offering discounts on items less than ten dollars.”

“You say that,” Mike says thoughtfully, “but I got one when I bought your Christmas present.”

“I guess Cathy liked you,” Will replies. “I’ve always thought she has taste,” he adds with a grin, leaning in to kiss him again.

“I forgot to ask,” Will says later, as they’re closing up the store together. “What were you mailing this morning? You don’t often send letters.”

“It wasn’t exactly a letter,” Mike says carefully as they approach the car. “It was a job application.”

“Seriously?” That is unusual.

“Yeah, seriously. Just a cash boost, you know.” They’re quiet for a

moment, and Will senses that Mike is psyching himself up for something, so he waits. “What if we didn’t go straight home?” he says suddenly, and Will smiles. Since their unprompted jaunt up to Lake Michigan after Joyce and Hopper’s wedding, these words have become a sort of inside joke between them, employed whenever they want to make sure that their relationship is still spontaneous and exciting.

“Listening.”

Mike’s ears blush a little, and Will wonders what he’s up to. “When I was in the city yesterday,” he says, speaking so quickly that his words rush together, “I saw a... a poster, for a restaurant who’re running a couples’ discount night. And I know,” he says, anticipating Will’s sceptical expression, “these places don’t normally have... our kind of people in mind, but this one said ‘all welcome’, with the ‘all’ underlined, and there was a little rainbow sticker in the corner, and –”

“Mike,” Will interrupts, knowing that he would keep going for the rest of time otherwise, “it’s a really nice idea.”

“But?”

“But nothing,” Will says with a laugh. “Sure, let’s go check it out.” Mike breathes a sigh of relief, and Will looks curiously at him. “Were you... actually nervous about asking me that?”

“Not about asking.” Will says nothing, to give him the chance to elaborate. “Just... I don’t know. It feels different doing that kind of thing here. Chicago feels like a long way away, you know? Feels safer.”

Will nods his understanding: the closer they are to home, the bigger the risk. And although he’s not sure if Mike would agree, for Will, the bigger the risk, the greater the thrill.

To distract Mike from his nerves, Will cranks the radio, and they sing along raucously to *Vogue* by Madonna (which Mike would *never*

admit to knowing by heart). By the time they're steering into an underground parking lot, Mike's almost forgotten why he was nervous. It's not exactly the centre of the world, but Indianapolis is still a pretty big city. Nobody knows them here. And even Indiana must have progressed a *little* since they were middle-schoolers pointedly ignoring their atypical feelings. In fact, Mike even dares to take Will's hand as they walk through the crowded streets, two of thousands, noticed by nobody. Will gives it a gentle squeeze, and Mike feels himself relax.

He inadvertently drops Will's hand and blinks with surprise as they enter the restaurant; even by his own expectations, it's very, well... *gay*. *Not that that's a problem*, he thinks forcefully in response to the automatic, disapproving voice in his head, which sounds an awful lot like his father's. *There's just a lot to look at*. This much is true: brightly-coloured streamers hang from the walls and light fittings; one exposed-brick wall is littered with plant pots. Mike notes with some amusement that there's even a classic-seventies disco ball hanging from the ceiling.

A smartly-dressed host with sleeve tattoos and bright green hair approaches them. "Good evening," they say, and Mike suddenly finds himself tongue-tied again. "Table for two?"

"Any chance of a quieter table?" Will asks quickly, slipping a hand back into Mike's, and the host nods in understanding.

"Right this way."

They show Will and Mike to a secluded booth in the far corner of the restaurant, and Mike feels a little relieved. He's still unused to this kind of scene, and the prospect of being able to observe from the edge seems a lot less daunting than being in the thick of it. A server hands them each a menu, and Will smiles encouragingly at Mike across the table.

"You okay?"

"Hm? Yeah," he says, keen to reassure him, hoping Will doesn't notice the fact that his leg is bouncing at a mile a minute. "Yes," he adds more fiercely, when Will doesn't look convinced. "This was my

idea, remember?”

“I know,” Will says gently, “but it’s not too late to back out. I know this is new to you.”

“And it’ll always be new if we don’t engage in it *sometimes*,” Mike points out, quite reasonable, and Will shrugs, accepting this.

“Your call.” A server comes over, and they order some food and soft drinks, which Mike insists on paying for. Will protests, claiming that Mike drove them there, and paid for their last date, but Mike won’t hear it.

This familiar push-pull is another staple of their relationship – with varying degrees of success, even since renewing their commitment to each other. As a rule, they tend to take turns paying for dates, to keep things as fair as possible. After all, as Dustin once unhelpfully remarked, the guy is expected to pay for dates. He then went on to ask who pays between them, a well-intended question which nevertheless resulted in him receiving a solid punch to the gut from Max.

However, they’ve also had problems in the past when Will’s noticed that Mike has a tendency to foot the bill without thinking. This, he claims, makes him feel as though Mike views himself as ‘the man’ in their relationship, which Will resents. The first time Will voiced this feeling, Mike adamantly denied it and spoke without fully thinking, stating that it was just because he’s just used to having more money to spend. Unsurprisingly, this did not help.

Mike quickly realised his mistake and they worked out this particular disagreement, but they still have small back-and-forths on occasions such as these, if Mike’s chosen a more expensive activity when it’s Will’s turn to pay. Usually, Will backs down and agrees to let Mike pay, as he does now, smiling gratefully at him from the other side of the booth.

Mike's inhibitions quickly fade as he realises that no one is paying them the slightest bit of attention, even when Will joins him on his side of the booth and leans into his side, revelling in this mild public display of affection, so impossible in most establishments. A server brings out their food, and the evening passes pleasantly as they drink in the atmosphere and marvel at the sheer number of people like them who pass in and out of the doors. Mike can't help wondering if he'll ever reach a point where he can wander into such a place without a second thought, not even slightly fazed by the idea of being *out* in public with Will.

Finally, he sees Will clamp his teeth together to suppress a yawn, and smiles. "Shall we?"

"I think we'd better," he says reluctantly, but then he freezes, his eyes widening with shock. "Oh, God," he murmurs. "I forgot to tell my family where I was going – they'll be losing it."

"Let's go," Mike says immediately. They leave the money they owe on the table and make a dash for it, practically sprinting back to the car.

Will's jittery all the way home, but to his relief, there are no red-and-blue lights flashing on the driveway when they pull up. He does, however, see his mother's familiar silhouette framed in the kitchen window, and he cringes. Yeah, he's in for it.

"Thanks for today," he says, trying to forget until Mike's gone. "I would have been *very* bored, stuck in that shop by myself for eight hours."

"No problem," Mike shrugs. "I had fun – tonight, too."

"I'd invite you in, but considering the circumstances..."

"No thanks," he says with a grin. "I've met your mom when she's pissed off. Once was enough." Will laughs and leans over the gearshift to kiss him gently on the lips, lingering only a moment before breaking away and easing himself out of the car.

"Love you," Mike calls after him, and Will pauses at the open window.

“Sorry, love you too. See you tomorrow, after work?”

“I’ll pick you up.”

Will leans in to kiss him once more, then jogs up the porch steps, bracing himself for the storm to come. “Hi,” he calls out tentatively, and his mother emerges from the kitchen with her arms folded.

“I know you’re an adult now,” she says in a quiet voice, “but you know I like you to tell me when you’re out for the evening.”

“I know,” he says apologetically, “I’m sorry, it wasn’t intentional. Mike didn’t suggest going out until we left the store.”

She hums in acknowledgement and shifts her weight to the other foot so she can lean against the doorframe. “Did you at least have fun?”

“Yeah, actually. We went out for dinner in the city.” She doesn’t quite meet his eye. “What?” he asks in a low voice.

“Nothing.”

“No, what?”

“I thought you two were being careful,” she says, and he narrows his eyes.

“We are, that’s why we went – ” He pauses. “Wait, even if we weren’t, how would you – ?”

“You can’t blame me,” she says, her guard clearly going up.

“Where’s El?” he says coldly, and he hears movement on the stairs, and what sounds suspiciously like a sniff. “You’re *joking*, you got El to spy on us? Does Hop know about this?”

“I was worried!” she protests. “And it wasn’t *spying*!”

“No?” he snaps incredulously. “What was it, then?” She doesn’t answer this, and he pinches the bridge of his nose under his glasses.

“That’s just... you really can’t do that, Mom.”

Her eyebrows inch closer together. “And you can’t just disappear into the night! Not – !” She doesn’t finish this argument, but he gets the gist.

“Okay, point taken!” he says, now thoroughly annoyed. “I’ll make sure to tell you if I’m going to be late, if you admit that using El’s powers to check on me and Mike is invasive, and a little creepy!”

“I didn’t do it to – !” she snaps, but regains her composure. “As I said,” she tries again, clearly going to some effort to keep her temper, “I only did it because I was worried.”

“That doesn’t make it okay,” he says wearily, “but I don’t want to just stand here and fight with you. Good night.”

It’s only frustrating because she’s right, really; he can’t blame her for being concerned about his whereabouts.. Since El closed the Gate, there hasn’t been a single incident, but all the same – once bitten, twice shy. *And we were bitten twice*, he thinks bitterly. All the same, Will can’t help feeling exasperated that she seems to look at him and still see a frightened thirteen-year-old with the fury of the Shadow burning in his eyes. He likes to think he’s stronger than that now, and that he’s able to leave that part of his life behind him. Whether or not this is wholly true is up for debate, but he’s trying.

The curtains flick and twist with the breeze as he sinks into his desk chair, examining his little painting doubtfully. Each time he looks at it, it looks worse than before; this is, admittedly, a recurring theme with every piece he does, but this one matters more than most, because as important as his degree is, he cares a lot more about Mike.

Mike, as it happens, is thinking about him too, for a similar reason. He’s pacing back and forth across the basement floor, wracking his brains for something to do for Will for their six-month ‘anniversary’. He’s not convinced this is the right word to use, given that they’ve technically been together a lot longer than six months; in fact, were it

not for a not-so-subtle hint from El the other day, he might not even have even thought to mark it at all.

As it is, he's pretty sure Will is making him something, judging the pointed look El gave him when he brought it up last week, and the faint smudges of paint he's glimpsed on Will's hands every time he's seen him for the last few days. This prospect terrifies him, because he doesn't consider himself a particularly creative person. Sure, he knows he's a good writer, but the thought of trying to write Will something, like a poem or, God forbid, a *song* makes him cringe. *We are absolutely not that couple*, Mike thinks firmly, running his hands through his already-unkempt hair. *I refuse to let us be that couple.*

Failing that, though, he has absolutely no ideas, and there are only three days left. He can't keep buying him art supplies, not least because it lacks a personal touch. He's vaguely regretting taking him out to dinner tonight, because he can't exactly justify doing it again in a few days' time. He collapses onto the couch with a sigh, resolving to go into the city on Monday and browse for inspiration.

Above him, he hears hushed words rising in volume, and his eyes roll back in his skull so far that he almost gives himself a headache. It can't be a good sign that this is the second night in a row that an argument has broken out. He's not stupid; he's never thought his parents are soulmates, and he's been aware of their problems for years, but until the beginning of the summer, they mostly just kept out of each other's way, not speaking.

Now, it seems like they're always finding things to complain about, and it's getting more frequent. First it was once a week, then twice, then every other day, and now, apparently, nightly. He groans and pulls a pillow over his head in a failed attempt to shut out the noise, and thinks of Holly. She's normally the one to keep conversation flowing at mealtimes, oblivious to the tension in the room, but it seems that even she's become aware of the contempt their parents hold for each other. She's certainly been very quiet the last few nights.

She was already in bed when he got back, but there's no way she's

sleeping through the racket coming from the living room, so Mike tiptoes upstairs, keen not to give his parents a reason to start shouting at him, rather than each other, and taps lightly on Holly's door, which has been left very slightly open. He can see that her light's still on, even though she should have been asleep nearly an hour ago.

"It's me," he says quietly through the crack. "Can I come in?"

"Yeah."

He pushes the door open and steps into the bedroom, closing the door gently behind him. "Are you okay?"

Holly shrugs. "Why are they fighting?"

"I don't know," he admits, "I wasn't there when it started."

"No, I mean... never mind," she sighs, drawing her knees up to her chest and sighing.

"You mean... like, generally?" he says, and she nods, shuffling over to one side of the twin bed. Mike takes the hint and sits down next to her, stretching out his long legs and leaning back against the wall. "Honestly, I don't really know that either. Sometimes parents fall out."

"Are they going to split up?" she asks, and he chews his lip, debating how much he should say.

"I hope not," he says eventually, "but even if they do, they'll still be there for you. You know that, right?"

"How do *you* know that?"

"Because they're our parents, Hol," he says. "They still love us, even if they don't love each other."

At least, Mom does, he thinks, but he doesn't say this.

"They've stopped," Holly says after a moment, and he hums an affirmative as he stands up.

“Try and get some sleep,” he says, reaching out and switching off the lamp on her nightstand. “Things will seem better in the morning.”

“Sure,” she replies doubtfully, and Mike pauses at the door when she speaks again. “Night, Mike.”

“Night.”

He returns to his room, feeling dejected, and he doesn't even know why. It's not like he didn't see this coming; it just hurts more now that Holly's aware of it too. It's as though he's always been able to live vicariously through her youthful obliviousness, but without this useful delusion, he's forced to accept the reality that his parents are two of the worst-matched people on the planet.

This comforting unreality has also become increasingly cracked because of the solidity of his relationship with Will at the moment. College has been a source of increasing frustration for Mike, so he's been spending a lot of time at Will's just to get away from it. As a consequence, the atmosphere in which he's been spending most of his time is that of a healthy, loving, committed relationship, and Mike thinks that this sheer contrast has seriously put into perspective how fucked his parents' marriage is.

This overwhelming surge of emotions puts Will back in his mind, and despite the fact that they parted only two hours ago, he's suddenly desperate to see him, as if to confirm that love is, in fact, real.

When he hears his parents come up to bed, still exchanging hissed words of disdain, he slips out with an overnight bag, padding silently down the stairs. The last few steps creak where the staircase curves around the wall, so he jumps them, landing catfooted on the carpet below.

Once he's outside, Mike executes his age-old scheme of getting his car off the drive unnoticed – before starting the engine, he takes the handbrake off, and using all of his minimal strength, he pushes it to the curb with one hand on the steering wheel. *This manoeuvre*, he thinks, exasperated, *is a lot easier with two people*. When he's far

enough from the house not to attract attention, he finally slides into the driver's seat and starts the engine.

He's not sure he could explain what he's feeling; he just knows he needs to see Will, and have him reassure him that they're nothing like Mike's parents. He's relieved, therefore, when he pulls into Will's street and sees light glowing from the open upstairs window.

"Will!" he hisses, but when no one appears, he reaches into the car and flicks the headlights on and off a few times, hoping to draw his attention that way. Finally, Will's head and shoulders appear at the window (shirtless, Mike notices with interest), and the irritated expression on his boyfriend's face clears as Mike raises a sheepish hand in greeting.

"Hold on," Will calls down quietly, and vanishes again, before reappearing at the front door a few moments later. Mike notices with disappointment that he's pulled on a t-shirt, but then El appears behind Will, looking curiously over his shoulder. "What are you doing here?" Will asks, as they each pull him into a concerned hug. "Did something happen?"

"Not yet," he says gloomily as they troop into the living room and shut the door behind them. Contrary to his initial expectations, he doesn't actually mind El being with them for this, since he'd have told her at some point anyway, but there is also something he wants to talk about with Will privately. "It's just Mom and Dad," he adds. "Things are getting worse. I'm pretty sure they're going to call it quits any day now."

"I'm sorry," El says quietly.

"I just needed to get out of the house," he explains. "I hope that's okay."

"Of course it is," Will replies gently, placing a hand on Mike's back and rubbing soothing circles into the tense muscles. "What do you want to do – do you want to go to bed? Or we can stay up and do something, your call."

"I don't think I'm ready to sleep," he says after a moment's thought.

"We could play a game of something," El suggests brightly, and Will shrugs his consent.

"Yeah, actually," Mike says, "that's a good idea." What he was really hoping for was something to take his mind off the situation, and this fits the bill perfectly. El goes off to the attic to choose one, and Mike turns on the couch to look at Will face-on. "I was thinking," he says, slipping a hand into Will's, "what if we left a little earlier than we'd said?"

"How much earlier?" Will says doubtfully.

"I was thinking Monday," Mike says, trying not to sound too much like he's desperate to get out of Hawkins.

"Mike, that's the day after tomorrow!"

"And?"

"And, I've told Cathy I can work next week," Will says, and Mike slumps to the side with a groan. "I might be able to get out of working for some days, but I can't just up and leave." Mike feels his eyes gently appraising him, and sees him smile sadly. "Can you wait until Tuesday or Wednesday?"

"I guess so," he says, trying unsuccessfully not to sound sullen.

"I'm sorry," Will says, and Mike knows he means it.

"Yeah, me too." He suddenly feels guilty for being so obstinate; after all, it isn't Will's fault he has to work. Mike leans forward and wraps him in a hug, pressing a kiss to his cheek as they break apart. "What do you think she'll bring down?"

"She's on a Monopoly kick at the moment," Will says gloomily. "I can't think why, she never wins."

"Really?"

"I mean, you know how ruthless El can be in games, but she just can't seem to get her head around certain aspects of it," he says, brushing his bangs to one side where they're falling over his face. He's clearly

showered (perhaps why he wasn't wearing a shirt when he arrived, Mike thinks), and his hair's lost its usual structure. It's very cute, in Mike's opinion. "Like, she doesn't see why certain things are worth more than others. Like, she always goes for the green properties because she likes the colour, even though they're the most useless ones on the board."

"I see what you mean," he says, but their conversation is abruptly cut short by the sound of footsteps on the stairs. Sure enough, she's brought down the Monopoly board.

"El, it's 11:30," Will says wearily, but she's unfazed.

"So? It's Sunday tomorrow, so you're not working. If we don't finish, we can finish in the morning." Will gives Mike a pointed look, and Mike suppresses a smile.

The game goes pretty much as Mike would expect: sure enough, El starts her hunt for the green properties, a fact which Will exploits heartlessly, trading North Carolina Avenue for nearly seven hundred dollars – more than twice its actual value. She also inexplicably tries for the utilities, which baffles Mike. "If you have both, you charge *ten times* the dice roll," she says earnestly at one point, ignoring Will's desperate attempts to explain that this is, in fact, an absolute maximum of 120 dollars.

Mike watches this exchange with fascination; when it comes to board games, El is normally very shrewd and tactical (she once solved a game of Clue! before Mike even took his second turn), so he wonders if it's to do with the money. Having not grown up with any concept of money or financial value, this concept was the one which took her longest to grasp, to Hopper's immense frustration.

Mike vividly remembers one time when they were still dating (as much as he tries not to dwell on this brief period), when he left her in charge of booking the Party's tickets to see *Back to the Future*, without even considering the inherent dangers. Minutes before the movie was due to start, El excitedly informed him that she had managed to upgrade their seats to include bottomless concession

refills, not realising that doing so had nearly doubled the price of the tickets. Will, Max, Lucas and Dustin were furious, and flat-out refused to cough up extra money to cover the cost, leaving a significant dent in his own savings.

Now, he lands on the Water Works, and hands over forty dollars, bemused by the smug expression on El's face. "See?" she says quietly to Will, who buries his head in his hands.

A string of unfortunate dice rolls leaves most of Mike's money in Will's hands, and he's forced to reluctantly mortgage the two dark blue properties upon which he pinned his hopes for the game.

"I'll buy them from you," Will says magnanimously, and Mike raises an eyebrow.

"Five hundred each."

"Bullshit, you're the one who's supposed to be paying me!"

"Alright, how much?"

"Half-price," Will says, popping a doughnut hole into his mouth and shrugging.

"I'm not selling at half-price!"

"What exactly do you think mortgaging is?"

"No," Mike says firmly, turning the cards resolutely over. "You'll only build houses on them, and then we're screwed."

"You're screwed anyway," Will points out, and Mike ignores this perfectly reasonable observation.

Sure enough, ten minutes later, he lands on one of Will's yellow properties and winces at the four houses positioned on it. "That's it," he says, throwing up his hands in defeat. "I'm broke. Good game."

"We're not done," El protests, and Will laughs.

"El, you have eight properties, and all of them are mortgaged. There

is no way for you to make money. Do you seriously want to drag this out any further?"

"Fine," she says crossly, tipping over her battleship in surrender. "But you can clean up." She flounces off up the stairs, and Will rolls his eyes.

"She's not very good at losing," he mutters, and Mike lets out a hum that very clearly means *obviously*.

Eventually, they crawl into bed together, and it doesn't escape Mike's notice that Will hastily shoves something into a desk drawer when they first enter the room.

"What was that?" he asks with interest as Will settles down beside him.

"Nothing," Will replies, too quickly. "It's a surprise," he adds, confirming Mike's theory that Will is making something for him.

"Okay," Mike says, too tired to interrogate him any further. Will offers him his little finger, and Mike wraps curls his own around it – their substitution for physical contact on hot nights.

Will drops off to sleep fairly quickly, as he sometimes does when Mike's there, but Mike lies awake for some time, watching his boyfriend's eyelids flicker gently and wondering what he's dreaming about. All the time, the thought of his job application lingers in the back of his mind; unusually, he wasn't completely truthful with Will when he asked this morning. This job is more than a simple cash boost: it's a low-level, full-time position in a newspaper office – in Louisville.

2. The Deer

Summary for the Chapter:

Fed up of small-town life, Will and Mike bring forward their trip to Chicago, desperate to get away and spend some quality time together. However, a heavy storm hits, and catastrophe ensues.

Notes for the Chapter:

The double-meaning in the title was both appropriate and intentional. I make no apologies.

Tuesday morning dawns, but Will doesn't actually see the sunrise – the rain is beating down too heavily to even work out where the sun is. He does, however, notice the clock strike 4:00, and groans quietly. He's unbelievably tired, having been awake now for nearly an entire day, and he really wants to join Mike in bed for a bit before he wakes up. Then again, since they're about to share a few weeks together, maybe it doesn't matter so much.

They're heading back to Chicago today, having brought their plans forward to get Mike out of his parents' house. After all, he can't spend *too* many consecutive nights at Will's without Karen and Ted getting suspicious (well, Karen primarily, because Mike bitterly contends that Ted doesn't notice anything he does).

However, today is also six months since their reconciliation, which is why Will is still at his desk, applying the finishing touches to his gift for Mike. It actually turned out to be a relief that Mike didn't come to work with him yesterday, as he was able to use his intermittent free time in the shop to work on it. All that's missing now is a few shadows, but this requires serious precision, as he has to use much darker paint, and if he paints over something he isn't supposed to, the whole picture could be ruined. Needless to say, he's more than a little stressed.

Will pinches his lips together in severe concentration as he gently lowers the brush to the paper, forcing his hand not to shake as he

traces the faint sketch outline of the lighthouse's shadow. His rough plan is to block it out in the dark navy watercolour paint, then add a few dots of white acrylic, to give the impression that the water's still sparkling under the shadow. Rather inexperienced, perhaps, but he doesn't really have enough time to do it properly. After all, he'd like to sleep at least a little tonight.

This careful process, thankfully, doesn't take him very long, and finally, hardly daring to believe it, he adds the final dot of paint, and drops the brush into the mug with his water in. He leans back in his chair, almost giddy with relief and exhaustion, stifling a yawn as he lifts his coffee cup to his lips. He tips it upwards, and promptly starts choking, having just swallowed a large mouthful of the water he's been using to clean his brush. He stares at the two cups in confusion, and frowns mid-cough – yep, he put his brush into his coffee. Fucking wonderful.

“Whassamatter?” Mike calls, his words slurring together with sleepy delirium, and he sits bolt upright. Will jolts into action, practically launching himself onto the bed and rubbing Mike's chest soothingly.

“It's fine,” he says calmly, tears springing to his eyes with the effort not to cough. “I just choked on my water.” Mike nods dumbly, clearly only half-awake, and lets Will guide him back down into a horizontal position with a gentle kiss to the forehead. Will tiptoes to the kitchen to find himself some fresh water, to rid himself of the sensation of the powdery brown water which is coating the inside of his mouth and making him want to gag. *This is why*, he thinks furiously, *you don't paint when you're this sleep-deprived*.

When he starts to feel clean again, he returns to the bedroom, still cursing himself, and gently fans the painting until it's dry enough to slide into one of his desk drawers without the risk of drawing dust. This done, he resolves to leave the brush in the coffee, to be dealt with in the morning, and slides into bed beside his boyfriend, glad that the air temperature has dropped enough to shuffle close and wrap an arm over his chest, pressing his chest against Mike's back.

Almost involuntarily, he nuzzles into Mike's shoulder, and hears a contented sigh vibrate against his chest. He tightens his hold very slightly, and he's so tired and comfortable that he falls asleep within

minutes.

When he wakes, he reaches instinctively for Mike, and the realisation that he isn't there rouses him properly, and he sits up, confused.

"Mike?" he croaks, squinting at the vaguely blurry shape at the desk on the other side of the room.

"What time did you come to bed last night?" he asks, and Will detects a note of amusement in his voice.

"Not sure," he mumbles, half-truthfully.

"Must have been late," Mike says, "for you to have been so tired that you put your paintbrush in your coffee." Will groans and slumps back down, burying his face in the pillow. He hears Mike laugh, and presently feels his hand on his waist, and his breath against the back of his neck, sending a shiver down his spine. "Can you tell me what you've been working on yet?"

"Desk, top drawer," Will says, his voice muffled by the pillow. He feels the mattress shift as Mike's weight lifts off it, and his footsteps are followed by a soft gasp of delight as he opens the drawer. "Happy anniversary, or something like that."

"Oh my god, Will," he breathes, returning to the bed and slipping an arm around him, pressing a kiss to the smidge of Will's face that isn't smothered by the pillow. "It's *perfect*."

"It's really not," Will says modestly, finally rolling over and allowing Mike to kiss him properly. "I could have done better if I'd given myself more time."

"I'm serious," Mike says earnestly. "It's beautiful. Although," he says, flicking him on the chest playfully, "I've spent ages beating myself up because I thought I'd lost that photo, and you've had it all this time!"

"Sorry," Will says with a smile. "Do you still want it back?"

"Keep it," Mike says softly between kisses. "I have a better one now."

He presses his lips against Will's once more, and wrinkles his nose. "Why does your breath smell of paint?" he remarks, and Will pushes him off as he rolls over again in despair.

They decide not to hang around in Hawkins, agreeing that the sooner they leave, the sooner they'll be in Chicago and be able to spend time together properly. Being at Will's is fine, and it's a relief beyond measure for Mike that they don't have to sneak around while they're there, pretending they're not dating – but it's still not the same as having their own space, and being able to come and go as they please without being answerable to anyone.

With this in mind, they pack up Mike's ancient car as soon as they've eaten breakfast and say their goodbyes; Will promises to come back to visit for a few days on his way back to college, and then it's hugs and handshakes, and before they know it, they're out on the open road, bound north for Route 65, which more or less connects Indianapolis to Chicago. Despite the heat of the day, they keep the windows firmly shut, and Mike powers his windshield wipers up to maximum to counter the torrential rain.

They talk for a while, but Will's running on about three hours of sleep, which is even less than normal, and drowsiness starts overtaking him.

"You can sleep," Mike says quietly. "I'm fine." Will nods gratefully, and reaches to the backseat for a pillow, tucking it under his head and shoulders and allowing himself to drift into a light sleep, stirring every so often if Mike goes over a bump in the road, or a truck horn sounds outside.

With the warmth of the car, the drum of the rain on the windshield, and Mike's gentle humming along with the radio, Will sleeps contentedly, feeling warm, comfortable and safe.

Which is why it's such a shock when Mike swerves.

Alone in the spare bedroom, El smooths out the new bedsheet she

just fitted, and moves some of her various knick-knacks into their proper places. As much effort as Will (and, increasingly often, Mike) make to tidy the room before they leave, they never *quite* manage to get it back to its original state, and she always has to spend an hour or so making it agreeable to her again.

She sighs morosely as she moves a picture of Mike and Will together; she always misses them – particularly Will – when they go away, not that she'll ever admit it to him. Today, though, feels different from usual, and she can't completely place why, but she has a distinctly uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach.

She has half a mind to...

El shakes her head, quickly applying the brakes on this particular train of thought before it leaves the station. She mustn't. She's only supposed to use her powers if she's in danger, and spying on her stepbrother and his boyfriend to allay her own paranoia absolutely doesn't count. Hop was really mad when he found out Joyce asked her to do so the other day, and she's not about to defy this rule again.

But what if I'm right? she thinks fretfully. What if they are in danger, and I could help them?

"You okay?" says a tentative voice, and El starts in surprise; she almost forgot Max was even here.

"Yeah. Just... worried about Will."

"Really? Why?"

"Not sure," she says. Max takes the other side of the duvet and together, they position it neatly on the bed, before sinking down onto it, immediately rumpling it. "Just... weird feeling. You know?"

"Do you want to do something about it?" Max asks, her normally sharp blue eyes soft and concerned.

"I'm not allowed," El says doubtfully, knowing what she's hinting at.

“Right.” A heavy silence hangs between them, and El picks at the duvet cover, arguing silently with herself. “Look, obviously I don’t want you to get in trouble,” Max says eventually, “but your instincts are normally good. And I know you – you’d never forgive yourself if something happened and you could have done something about it.”

El sighs, knowing she’s right: she’d be furious with herself. “Where’s Hop?”

“Downstairs. I’ll keep watch for you.”

“I’ll need a blindfold.”

“On it.” Max bounces up and digs through the closet, until she pulls out Will’s burgundy tie, left there after the wedding. “Is this okay?”

El nods and wraps it around her head, tying it with an inelegant knot to hold it in place. With the world shut out, she breathes out, allowing the inky depths of the Void to fill her mind, until she feels cool, shallow water ebb and flow over her bare feet. She looks around, checking for distractions which might hinder her abilities, but it’s just darkness in every direction. Good. She’s ready.

She pictures Will and Mike, both independently and together, recalling specific details to speed up the process: the clothes they were wearing when they left; the smell of Will’s shower gel; the angular curves of Mike’s face, the blends of green and hazel in Will’s eyes; the dusting of freckles across Mike’s nose. “Find them,” she whispers to no one in particular, and jumps at the sharp, distinct sound of rubber on asphalt behind her.

El whirls around, and a lone deer trots towards her, clearly frightened, but unhurt. She watches it as it runs past, confused; she’s never seen this type of animal before, and she has no idea why she’s seeing it now. Her neck twists instinctively round, as a metallic *crash* echoes around the Void. A sturdy-looking tree towers over her, with a familiar taupe car rammed into the side of it. Its entire front has bent inwards, and as she watches, the engine dies, and smoke starts hissing from under the dented hood. She looks inside, but peculiarly,

it's unoccupied.

"No!" El stumbles backwards in shock, and gasps with pain as she collides with something hard – a metal pole, topped with a red-and-blue sign, bearing the number 65 in large, wide letters.

"El!" Max's voice is distant, but worried, and El reaches for the blindfold and pulls it off. "What happened?" Max says gently, reaching for a box of tissues and wiping at the gentle stream of blood trickling down El's lips.

"Their car crashed," she mumbles, her voice audibly shaking. "There was a sign saying sixty-five."

"Sixty-five?" Max echoes. "What kind of sign?"

"It looked like a shield," El says, unsure how to describe it.

Max thinks for a moment, then reaches for a ballpoint pen from the desk, drawing a shape on the palm of her hand. "Like this?"

"Yes!"

"That's a route sign," Max says. "They must be on Route 65. Come on."

Lucas is the only other member of the Party with his own car, so El and Max hurry out and grab Max's bike from the porch.

"Remind me why we can't just call your parents?" Max says as El climbs onto the back and wraps her arms around her for security. "I know they're working, but surely for this..?"

"Because it'll freak Joyce out," El says firmly, "and I'll have to explain that I used my powers."

"You'll have to do that anyway," she points out. This is true, of course, but there's no time, and El says so.

“Get your car keys,” Max says the second Lucas opens the door. He blinks in surprise; under any other circumstances, El would laugh. They’ve never been the most openly affectionate couple, but even for Max, that was blunt. “We’ll explain on the way.”

“I – I have work in an hour,” he protests, but he pulls his keys from his pocket and leads them to the ageing garnet-red minivan parked at the front of the house. “We both do.”

“Then we’ll get fired,” Max replies shortly, climbing into the passenger seat as the locks blip open.

“If I’m getting fired, I want to know why,” he says crossly, turning the ignition and pulling out onto the road.

“Will and Mike crashed their car,” El says. “I saw it in the Void.”

“Shit, are you serious?” They both nod, and he presses his foot a little harder on the gas, increasing their speed slightly. “Where am I going?”

“Route 65. They were going to Chicago, so probably northbound.”

“Max, that road’s a hundred miles long,” Lucas exclaims. “They could be anywhere along it.”

As it turns out, ‘anywhere’ turns out to be a lot further than any of them imagined, and after an hour and a half, Lucas tentatively proposes the possibility that El was mistaken. She’s starting to wonder the same – after all, they haven’t passed the place she saw in the Void, and Mike and Will couldn’t have got much further than where they are now. To top it all, the rain seems to be worsening, if that’s even possible.

“What’s that?” Max calls suddenly, pointing out of the front windshield. Lucas slows down, and sure enough, two figures are standing at the roadside.

“Oh, thank God,” Lucas exclaims, rolling to a stop. El pulls up the hood of her raincoat and steps out into the downpour, shouting over the noise of the rain.

“Will!”

“El?” She runs towards him and wraps him in a tight hug, but quickly lets go – he’s absolutely drenched through, and he gasps with pain at her touch. “What the hell are you doing here?”

“Come on,” she says, beckoning to the car. She climbs into one of the seats at the very rear of the car, leaving Will and Mike to take the middle row.

“How did you find us?” Will asks as they settle in, and he helps Mike with his seatbelt.

“El,” Max says, twisting around in her seat to look at them. “What happened?”

“A deer ran into the road,” Mike says weakly, still holding his wrist, his face almost ashen with numb pain. “I missed it, but couldn’t stop properly on the road.”

“I think he’s broken his wrist,” Will says, concerned. “It took a lot of the impact when we hit the tree.”

“What about you, are you okay?” Lucas asks.

“I’m a bit sore, but nothing serious.”

“Thank God you’re okay,” Max says, as Lucas starts the engine again. “I think we should go back, and take them to the hospital in Indianapolis,” she says, and Lucas nods his agreement.

“I don’t need a hospital,” Will says, startled.

“That’s your call,” Lucas shrugs, “but Mike definitely does.”

The next few hours are bizarrely uneventful, but punctuated with

overwhelming spikes of activity. No one talks much on the drive to the hospital; Will and Mike are understandably exhausted from their ordeal. El's worn out too – these days, it's not often she uses her powers to this extent. Only Max and Lucas chat quietly in the front of the car, as the others sleep fitfully.

The first flurry of activity occurs when they reach the hospital; they troop in together, and before too long, Mike's whisked away to x-rays, while a nurse checks Will for signs of concussion. With this done, Lucas takes Will to an outlet a few blocks away so he can change out of his wet clothes. El and Max, meanwhile, dig through their pockets for some change and approach one of the payphones bolted to the emergency room wall.

El tells Max the number, but warns her that nobody will pick up. "They're still at work."

"Still worth trying," Max says, but shakes her head when the answering machine kicks in. "Do you know Mike's parents' phone number?" When El recites it effortlessly, she doesn't even question it – after all, she just has that kind of memory. This time, though, the line *clicks* as someone picks up at the other end.

"Hello?"

"Hi, is that Mrs Wheeler?"

"Speaking. Who's this, please?"

"It's Max Mayfield," she says, and, realising that she doesn't recall ever having had a one-on-one conversation with Karen Wheeler before, she adds, "Mike's friend."

"Is everything okay?"

"Sort of," she replies with a sideways glance to El. "We're at the general hospital in Indianapolis."

When Mike comes around, he's tired and sore, and his arm feels stiff and numb.

“Steady,” the nurse says gently, helping him sit up. He’s on an examination bed, and looks around, disoriented. A clean white plaster cast adorns his right wrist and hand, and he resists the urge to dig his finger underneath to scratch where it itches.

“You didn’t say you were giving me general anaesthetic,” he mumbles crossly, and the nurse raises an eyebrow.

“We didn’t,” she says drily. “We gave you local, and then you passed out anyway, after we put the cast on.” He feels his cheeks burn with embarrassment. “Can you stand?” He does, wobbling only slightly as he puts his weight on his feet. “Good. Come on, I’ll take you back to your friends.” It’s a little way back to the ER, so she attempts some small talk, to his displeasure. “So, are you local?”

“Fairly. I’m from Hawkins,” he says, hoping she isn’t aware of its sordid reputation. “But I’m at college in Chicago.”

“Hope you don’t do a lot of writing,” she says with a low chuckle, pointing to the cast. “What’s your major?”

“Literature and the English Language.”

“Eesh, that’s unfortunate.”

“This’ll heal before September, right?” he says anxiously.

“Oh, I expect so. Might want to invest in a typewriter for any summer assignments, though. Or a computer, if you can afford one.”

“Not after this,” he says darkly, and she grimaces.

“You have insurance?”

“My parents do,” he says. “Honestly, I’ve been thinking about packing college in, anyway.”

“Really?” she says, leading him into a stairwell. “How come?”

“It’s just... not fulfilling,” he shrugs. “I hate it. And I hate living so far from...” He hesitates, then decides to be honest, for once. After all, she’s on duty, so she’s not exactly going to spit at him and call him

unpleasant names. "...from my boyfriend," he finishes, stuttering only slightly on the last word.

"That's fair enough," she says, clearly unfazed. "Where does he live?"

"He's at college in Kentucky," he replies, after a moment of shock at how well this pronouncement was received. Huh. Maybe the world really is different outside of Hawkins. "I have a job interview in the same city next week, so... I don't know."

"Well, if you're serious about dropping out, you'll need to have a backup plan," she says sincerely. "Best to know what you're running *to*, and not just what you're running *from*." This is so unexpectedly profound that Mike doesn't really know what to say.

"I suppose," he says, and silence falls again. "My parents will be furious," he adds with a nervous chuckle.

"Maybe," she replies. "My parents thought I was selling myself short by training as a nurse instead of a doctor," she adds, "but I knew who I was, even then. I *like* interacting with patients, and these doctors are always just going from bed to bed reading charts. You don't get to know anyone that way."

"I guess not."

"Try taking charge of your own life," she says with a shrug. "You'll enjoy it way more than just doing what your parents want."

Mike contemplates this, and wonders if she's right. All the same, he's still reluctant to imagine what they'll say when they found out he totalled his car and broke his wrist on the same day.

He doesn't have to wait very long, because he's swamped in a tight hug mere seconds after re-entering the ER. "Ow," he says into his mother's coat, and she steps back to examine him.

"Thank *goodness* you're okay," she exclaims, and he feels bad for being surprised at her concern; maybe she cares more than he's given her credit for. He glances over her shoulder, having just spotted Will

and Lucas coming in.

"I'm alright," he shrugs. "Can't say the same about the car, though."

He's hoping she'll tell him not to worry about it, but concerningly, Karen doesn't reply at all, which doesn't seem like a good sign. "Are we okay to leave?" she says instead, addressing the nurse.

"Once you've registered your contact details at reception, yes," she says, nodding politely to Mike.

He doesn't say much on the way home; he mostly just listens to his mother alternating between expressing her relief that he wasn't more seriously injured, and voicing her disappointment that he was careless enough to crash the car, necessitating a fortune in medical bills.

"While we're on the topic of money," she says slowly, "I'm glad to have you alone for a moment."

"Why?" he asks, his guard immediately going up.

"I was going to wait to tell you when your father was here, too, but..." She sighs. "I'm sure you've noticed that your father and I have been having some... problems lately."

"If by 'lately', you mean the last fifteen years – sure."

She ignores the slight and persists. "Well, we've decided to legally separate."

"Okay," he says; the only surprise is how little these words affect him. Obviously, he's been expecting them for months – years, even – but he thought he'd feel *something* upon finally hearing them. Maybe the anaesthetic hasn't yet worn off. He frowns, though, as he thinks of something. "What does that have to do with money?"

"Be realistic, Mike," she says, her voice still relatively calm and gentle. "We'll have attorneys to pay, and settlements, and your father will need to buy somewhere to live. In other words," she says

regretfully, “we won’t be able to pay for you to go to college anymore, let alone replace your car. I’m so sorry.”

Mike thinks about this. He considers it for a long moment, and he feels her glance over at him every so often, as if willing him to say something. “Alright,” he says at last. “I was thinking about dropping out anyway. Maybe it’s a sign.”

“What?” Karen replies sharply, and he can’t help thinking that this is nothing like what she expected him to say. “You can’t drop out!”

“Sure I can,” he says with a shrug. “Can you take me to Will’s?”

“Actually, I think we need to go home and talk about this,” she replies, in the same voice she used to use when Mike was a sulky middle-schooler.

“Talk about what?” he snaps. “No, seriously, what do you think we need to talk about? I’m an adult, aren’t I? Can’t I take charge of my own life, for once?”

“Don’t take that tone with me,” she replies severely, and he has to try very hard not to lose his temper entirely.

“Go on then,” he says furiously. “Say what you need to say. Let’s get it over with.”

“I have several things,” she says, but he can tell she’s stalling. “Firstly, you need to go to college if you’re going to have a hope of success.” He rolls his eyes and doesn’t bother responding to this. “Secondly, we haven’t even talked about what happened with the car today. That was our car, Mike! You *need* to learn to take better care when you’re driving.”

He surveys her, unimpressed. “Incredible advice. You know that never once occurred to me today?”

“Michael,” she says warningly.

“I’m not kidding,” he goes on, so tired and angry that he’s hardly aware of what he’s saying. “I actually set out this morning with every intention of killing both myself and my boyfriend by driving into a

tree, and driving you to financial ruin.”

The car stops with a jolt as Karen slams on the brakes and stares at him in shock. “What did you just say?”

Mike looks blankly at her, barely able to remember what he said. The rain drumming on the roof is the only respite from the otherwise deafening silence that’s hanging between them. *Oh, no. Surely I didn’t say that.* “I, uh...”

“Tell me that was a joke.” A nervous laugh escapes the corner of her mouth. “Please.” Her hand lifts from the steering wheel to her mouth, and she chokes, “Your... boyfriend?”

Try as he might, Mike cannot conjure a word. Not a single utterance of explanation, not a single lie, nothing. Even when it finally occurs to him to laugh dismissively and say that he misspoke; even when he thinks to offer her a strange look of her own and tell her that he said *best friend*, he simply can’t summon the words.

He isn’t sure why. Perhaps he’s in shock; perhaps he’s more concerned that she’d see through the lie anyway. Perhaps he just doesn’t want to lie. After all, she’s just admitted that they’re not going to be giving him any more money, so what does it matter if they know?

“Yeah, okay,” he says finally. “Will is my boyfriend. I’m queer. Is that what you wanted to hear?”

“Oh, god,” she murmurs, and he expects her to start driving again, but instead, she leans back in her seat and runs her hands through her hair. “It’s okay,” she says eventually.

“It... it is?” he says uncertainly, thinking that this seems too good to be true.

“Yes,” she says, a grim determination in her voice. “There are... options.”

Oh, so it *was* too good to be true. “I know what you’re thinking, and if you even suggest it, I’m walking out of this car and never coming back. I am not kidding.”

“Well, what do you expect?” she bursts out.

“What do I *expect*? You’re my mom!” He matches her tone, suddenly more outraged than he ever expected to be. “You’re supposed to have my back!”

“I do!” she replies, looking aghast. “That’s why I was going to suggest getting you some help!”

He curses under his breath, not caring if she hears. “Just... take a moment to think about what you’re saying, will you?” he demands. “You actually think that wanting me to be... to be poked and prodded and *forced* into a life I don’t want... You think that’s more supportive than just accepting that I’m happy, for the first time in my life?”

“It’s not – ”

“Normal, natural, biblical, whatever. I’ve heard it all before, Mom – from my middle-school *bullies*,” he says, spitting the last word. “Congratulations, you’re on the same level as them. Hope you’re pleased.”

With this, Mike grabs his backpack from the footwell, unbuckles his seatbelt and steps out of the car into the incessant rain, stopping only briefly to collect his suitcase from the trunk; after all, he never changed out of his wet clothes from earlier, so as long as his cast stays dry(ish), it doesn’t really matter that he’s being rained on. With this in mind, he pulls a jacket from the backpack and winds it around his arm for extra protection.

He can see the car in his peripheral vision, still stationary at the side of the road, half a mile from the town. He lets out a derisive laugh, wondering if she’s still there because she’s expecting him to come back, and feels a bizarre sense of déjà-vu.

He’d just turned nine when his parents sat him and Nancy down in the living room and told them that they were going to have a little brother or sister. Thirteen-year-old Nancy was more or less

indifferent: always wise beyond her years, Mike suspects now that she could already tell that this baby was a last-ditch effort to save their parents' marriage. Mike, though, was furious – he'd been the youngest in the family for nearly a decade, and resented the thought of this changing.

The logical conclusion, therefore, was to run away, so he announced at lunchtime that he was leaving for good. He packed his school backpack with his toothbrush, his favourite books, a small packet of biscuits, his SuperComm and a hat, in case it got cold – all the essentials for a third-grader starting a new life on his own, obviously.

His mother was just serving up their dinner when he made his grand exit, standing at the front door and hollering that he was leaving, and that there was nothing they could do to stop him. Mike remembers being most insulted that nobody even tried (in fact, Nancy actively encouraged it), so he left, slamming the door behind him.

Before he even reached the end of the cul-de-sac, a large dog barked aggressively at him from a neighbour's front yard, startling him so much that he fled back home, resolving that having a younger sibling was better than being eaten alive. Upon his return, his family didn't even pause their conversation, but his mother simply pointed to the plate of casserole she'd already set down in his place at the table, which he dutifully ate.

Now, he doesn't even look back at the motionless car, and vaguely wonders if his mother will serve him a portion of their dinner when she eventually gives up and goes home. This time, though, no intimidating dog will force him back. He intends to go back once, for the rest of his things. If, then, his mother wants to apologise and make amends... well, he might consider it, but as of this moment, his family comprises Nancy and Will, and Holly, if she wants.

It takes him about half an hour, but finally, he trudges up the Byers-Hoppers' porch steps, cold and soaked to the skin. Hopper answers his exhausted knock, looking positively bewildered to see him. "Mike," he says, shocked, taking in his pitiable appearance. "Get inside, you must be freezing. *Will!*" he yells up the stairs, but El

reaches him first, followed closely by Max, who must be staying the night, or something.

“What happened?” she says, tugging at his sleeve to examine his cast, checking its structural integrity.

“Long story,” he replies weakly, and footsteps clatter on the stairs.

“Mike?” Will says in disbelief. “God, you’re soaking, did you swim here or something?”

“He needs a bath,” Hopper says in his quiet, gruff way.

“I’ll go,” El says earnestly, but Will shakes his head.

“Thanks, but I’ll sort it. Come on.” He takes Mike’s unbandaged hand and leads him up the stairs, concerned about how cold he seems. “At least your cast is dry,” he says to fill the peculiar silence. “More or less, anyway.” Mike still doesn’t say anything, and Will is *really* becoming concerned now. He runs a hot bath, and helps Mike out of his wet clothes, holding his hand as he steps into the steaming water, his right arm draped over the edge of the bath to keep his cast clear of the water. “I’ll be back in a bit,” he says softly. “Call if you need me.”

“Will do,” he mumbles.

Will’s trying to piece together what could *possibly* have occurred – of the two of them, he left the hospital first with El, Lucas and Max, because Mike’s mother was still giving the staff her insurance information. That was about an hour and a half ago, so in that time, something happened that has resulted in Mike turning up on his doorstep with the suitcase he was taking to Chicago, looking like, well, a drowned rat.

He can’t make sense of it, so he stops trying, and focuses on the numerous tasks at hand: he shoves Mike’s drenched clothes into the washing machine and digs through the sodden suitcase for something that’s actually dry. Failing this, he invades the spare bedroom for some of Jonathan’s spare clothes, settling on a loose-fitting band t-

shirt and a pair of sweatpants. Lastly, he retrieves a pair of his own socks from the dryer and a clean towel, and returns to the bathroom with a gentle knock.

“Hi,” Mike says quietly, and Will’s relieved to see that the warmth seems to have revived him a bit.

“Brought you some things you can change into,” he says. “And I’ll fetch you something to eat and take it up to the attic.”

“Thanks,” he says, still sounding weary, but Will thinks the prospect of food has cheered him slightly. “I’ll come find you when I’m done.” Will kisses the top of his head, then goes to the kitchen to see what he can find.

Mike returns about a half-hour later, looking clean and comfortable, but still as subdued as before. Will’s on his bed, reading; he’s swiped Mike’s copy of *Jurassic Park*, which he’s been wanting to read since Mike got it at Christmas. When he hears Mike’s footsteps on the attic stairs, though, he folds over the corner of the page to mark his place and sets it down, letting Mike curl up on the bed and lean against his chest.

“So.” He runs his hands gently through Mike’s hair, still damp from the bath. “What’s going on?” A faint stutter escapes Mike’s throat, but makes it no further as his voice cracks, and his shoulders start to shake. “Hey, now,” Will says softly, pulling him a little closer.

Mike makes a quarter-turn so he can bury his face in Will’s sweater, and Will freezes in shock as several strained, violent sobs escape from the depths of Mike’s gut, muffled by the cotton. Slightly at a loss, he rubs soothing circles into Mike’s back, whispering words of love and comfort as Mike practically howls into his chest, his whole torso heaving with the force of his misery pouring out with each shuddering breath.

Eventually, he goes still, save for a few exhausted hiccups, and Will gently encourages him into a more upright position. He makes it about halfway, leaning against Will’s arm and resting his head on his

shoulder. "What happened?" Will says at last.

"You know the phrase 'when it rains, it pours'?" His voice is weak and rough from crying, and Will's heart hurts for him.

"Sure, when one bad thing happens, loads do. Right?"

"Right. Well," Mike says with a sniff and a watery laugh, "my mom told me they're getting divorced, so I told them we're dating and that I'm dropping out of college. So yeah, just your average Tuesday afternoon."

Will takes a moment, making a fruitless effort to process all of this. "Okay," he says slowly, "that's a lot of information to get all at once." He decides it's best to take this peculiar collection of statements one at a time, but first Mike needs to eat, and probably rehydrate, so he reaches over to his nightstand and passes him a plate holding some bread, some cheese, a piece of cake and an apple. Mike attacks it ravenously, and Will seizes his moment. "So... your parents are finally splitting up?"

"Yeah," he says indistinctly, his mouth full of cheese. "And Dad's moving out, so they need money for that. And they can't pay for me to go to college anymore."

"Well, that doesn't mean you have to drop out," Will says, reasonably. "I mean, Mom and Hop aren't paying for me, and I'm getting by."

"No, I've had enough," he says firmly, swallowing a mouthful of bread and biting into the apple. "I'm so tired of it, Will. And with this," he says, lifting his splinted wrist, "I can't write any of my summer assignments without some serious help, so I'd be screwed when I start in September anyway. I just... I don't know. I've been wanting to stop for a while, as you know, and this seems like, I don't know, an omen."

"Okay," Will says again. "So... what, will you stay in Chicago? Or come back here?"

"Yeah, that's the thing," Mike says. "That was when it just sort of came out that we're together, and my mom said she wanted me to

‘get some help’.” He makes air quotes with his good hand and rolls his eyes.

“Yikes.”

“Exactly. So I got out of the car, and walked the rest of the way here.”

“Jesus, Mike! How far?”

“Only about half a mile,” he admits, realising it sounds less cool this way, “but still. My point is, I can’t come back here without accepting my parents’ ‘help’.”

“So what’s your plan?”

He hesitates. “You know that job application I sent off last week?”

“What about it?”

“It wasn’t just for a cash boost,” he admits, not quite able to look Will in the eye. “It’s full-time, at a newspaper. Entry level. It’s not much,” he adds, “but I’m hoping it could, I don’t know, pave the way to doing something with my writing. And they called me yesterday, and asked to come for an interview.”

“Mike, that’s awesome,” Will says with an encouraging smile, squeezing his shoulder and pressing a kiss to his cheek. “Why did you feel you couldn’t tell me that before?”

“Because it’s in Louisville,” he replies after a moment, breaking a piece off the cake and giving it to Will.

“Oh?”

“And I guess... I don’t know,” he says, with a nervous laugh, “I guess I was psyching myself up to ask if you wanted to move in together.”

“Oh, wow,” Will says, blinking in surprise.

“We don’t have to,” Mike says quickly, “if, you know, you think it’s too soon, or whatever,” but Will shakes his head.

"No, I... I certainly think it's worth discussing."

"You do?"

"Yeah, I mean, think about it," says Will. "Going long-distance again would be a bitch without the car, right?" Mike nods. "And like... I'm not an expert, but I think two and a half years is a sensible amount of time to be dating before living together."

"And it's not like we don't know each other," Mike adds through a mouthful of cake. "And we've been living together half the week for the last six months anyway."

"Right, exactly. It does mean," Will says thoughtfully, "that you might just have to take any job that's going if this one doesn't work out. *If*," he clarifies when Mike looks offended.

"I could do that," he says quietly after a moment's consideration. "You know, just to tide us over until something better comes up." They fall silent for a moment, each lost in musings about practicalities; the thrill of not just seeing each other at weekends; the comforting thought of waking up together each morning; and not having to leap to the other end of the couch to avoid being spotted by Will's current college roommate. "So what do you think?" Mike asks after a minute or so.

"I think we should do it," Will says, and his voice betrays a familiar tone of nervous excitement. "Do you?"

Mike nods, smiling slightly for the first time since he arrived. "Yeah, I do. Let's do it."

Author's Note:

Needless to say this one will take longer than the first installment! Hope you've enjoyed it - please do leave a comment if so: it doesn't have to be long, or even coherent, I just like to know your thoughts. If you'd rather be anonymous, feel free to drop an ask on Tumblr, where you can find me at @tea-for-one-please!